

*J.P. Naik*

## **To Begin a Revolution with a Revolution**

### *Foreword*

A REVOLUTION IN LIFE and a revolution in education have always to go together, because education is life. An educational revolution could have followed (and should also have done so) when a political revolution in our life took place in 1947, in the form of the attainment of independence. This possibility and its need were stressed by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as early as 1948. Speaking at the Educational Conference convened by the Ministry of Education in that year, he said:

Whenever conferences were called in the past to form a plan for education in India, the tendency as a rule was to maintain the existing system with slight modifications. This must not happen now. Great changes have taken place in the country and the educational system must keep pace with them. *The entire basis of education must be revolutionized.*

We did not make the most of this opportunity, to the detriment not only of education but of life itself.

A second chance for this purpose – a very rare occurrence in life – has come again: an educational revolution has now to precede a socio-economic revolution in life. We have embarked upon a great adventure of national reconstruction whose objective is to abolish poverty, unemployment and ill-health and to create a new social order based on the dignity of the individual, liberty, equality, and social justice. This revolution will not be possible unless there is a simultaneous educational revolution to create an educated and cultured nation imbued with the values essential to such a social order.

The next ten years will decide how we utilize this second chance. If

used properly, it can lead us on to the great society whose vision inspired our great leaders and help us claim our rightful place in the comity of nations.

Destiny is ruthless. She generally gives *one* chance for survival and we are indeed very fortunate to have had *two*. For sheer lack of proper planning and adequate effort, we missed the first. Can we dare miss the second?

### *The Dream of a Dictator-That-Was-Not-To-Be*

I AM NOT, DEAR READER, A HABITUAL DREAMER. On the other hand, I sleep like a log and either do not dream at all or at least never recollect what I have dreamt, very probably because I do most of my “dreaming” when awake.<sup>1</sup> But yesterday I dreamt, for the first time in years, and to be honest about it, I do not know when I shall dream again, if I ever do it at all. And believe me, it was no touch-and-go affair. The dream was so vivid and so moving that on getting up I had some difficulty in convincing myself that I was not awake and that I was, really and truly, “dreaming”. I had, however, to accept the reality and try to forget all about it. But since I did not forget it either and since it kept on recurring again and again, I decided to write about it which I have found is the best way to get out of a haunting memory.

What was remarkable about the dream is a queer contradiction it presented, so queer indeed that I do not know how it could ever have happened at all. I dreamt that I was the dictator of India – God forbid! – and that I was trying to put across a certain programme of educational reconstruction. Now I am so confirmed a democrat and so proud that India has opted for a democratic way of life that I cannot think of a dictator in India; and what is even more important, I am sure that I am not made of that sterner stuff the dictators are moulded from. Apart from its impossibility, therefore, I could not also think of a more unsuitable choice of an individual. And yet there it was, a total *fait accompli*. On the other hand I would love to rebuild education, not through orders and rigid uniformities the dictators are so fond of – Napoleon, they say, could pull out a watch from his pocket and say what every schoolchild in the French Empire was doing at the moment – but through persuasion (I so love to talk) and through building up the initiative, the freedom and the creativity of

1. There are, of course, a few friends who assert that I hardly do anything else. But I am afraid they are a little unkind.

teachers and students. I thus found that I was doing what I loved, in a way that I perfectly hated. But the fact was that I enjoyed it and judging from the reactions of my “dream” people, I also seemed to be doing it well. I have no desire to rush you, dear Reader. You need not take me on trust for both the parts of this statement. Towards the end of this story (assuming that you remain awake and patient enough till then), you may be able to judge the second part for yourself.

MY FIRST RECOLLECTION is that of a Cabinet session wherein I had called my Secretaries to discuss the plans for implementing a programme of educational reconstruction. They were all there, except for the Education Secretary, who I came to know later had insisted on personally bringing to the meeting a copy of the Report of the Education Commission (with its underlying papers and supplementary volumes) and had literally collapsed under the weight and had to be rushed to the hospital. In the hullabaloo that followed, the copy of the Commission’s Report, which was the only one available, got lost (I cannot say fortunately or unfortunately), and for a minute we did not know what to do. The situation was, however, saved when the Finance Secretary pointed out that, with the Report of the Commission having been thus disposed of, the implementation of the programme<sup>2</sup> need be held up no longer. So we decided to go ahead with the plan. Two other favourable developments which were hailed by all those present also happened simultaneously. All our friends in advanced countries informed us that they would not lend us any “experts” and that they would give us no “aid”, with or without strings. This, the Home Secretary said, was good in every way because with no experts to misguide or confuse us, we were likely to do some sensible things and that, with no money to squander or throw about, we stood a sporting chance of concentrating on the essentials. Anyway, we began under good auguries (like all dictators, I also became a little superstitious in my dream).

After the discussion about implementation had gone on for a while, we soon realized that we were up against two formidable difficulties. The first was that we could not decide *where* to begin, because of the sheer length of the recommendations on educational reform. My Scientific Secretary told me that if all the educational recommend-

2. Oh, I forgot to mention. My first order on assuming charge was to abolish the Planning Commission, not so much to plan better as to be able to plan at all.

ations in the post-Independence period had been put end to end instead of moving in a circle as they usually did, every student and teacher would have walked up to the moon long ago and forestalled both the USA and the USSR (or is it the other way about?). The second was that every trick known to the world for launching a new programme – national broadcasts, celebrations of national days, issue of special numbers, token implementation by big guns like governors and ministers, and so on – had been so often tried in post-Independence India and made to fail so completely that we could not also decide *how* to begin. For instance, we were all opposed to the idea that this programme should begin like the *Hard Work Campaign* of the government when ministers went to schools to celebrate *Shramdan* days, kept the children waiting for three to five hours by coming late, then made them listen to a long and boring talk which no one understood (and where the poor headmaster came into trouble because, although the children had loyally carried out his commands to clap hands frequently and loudly, the poor innocents had done so at the wrong points) and then declared a holiday in honour of his visit so that it turned out, after all, to be a fairly tolerable holiday. Yes, we all knew the don'ts! My Information Secretary had prepared an elaborate dossier of what we should *not* do by carefully compiling what the Government of India *did* do. But, then, where could we go from there?

Well, to be frank about it, we were just stumped and could not, for the life of us, decide where to begin and how.<sup>3</sup> It was at this point that my wife walked in with the usual tea and cashewnuts. I never knew that dictators liked cashewnuts – that made me feel that they were almost human. And by the way, that's another of my problems. I am not a dreamer, so I can't say much about it. But you folks who dream perhaps know better. I guess menfolk see a lot of women in their dreams; but does one really see one's own wife? Anyway to come back to the point, I was glad that my wife came in because she always has an answer for most of my worries – and that, by the way, is why I married her – and seeing the worried look on my face, asked me what the trouble was; and when I put it to her, she smiled – she has an illuminating smile, you know – and said:

3. The poet who said that a little knowledge was a dangerous thing was a fool-well, like most poets. But I never realized until now how dangerous a thing a "know-all" state can be!

"Silly, why do you worry so much about it? Whom is education meant for?"

"Why, for the uneducated, the illiterate, the unilluminated", I said.

"That's it. A good businessman consults his customers – they are always right (this is the secret behind the American dollar). So why don't you consult your customers? Get together a dozen elderly illiterate men and women and ask for their advice. Never having been to a training college, they will perhaps give you the right advice for educational reconstruction."

That settled it. This was the best advice we had so far; and even if it were not – tell me, can anyone disregard his wife, or what is worse, a dictator's wife? We quickly got together nearly two dozen illiterate dumbs – every Secretary present could contribute a servant for the purpose though he had no advice to offer – and we took counsel with them and made up our plans. I will tell you only the plans and not bore you with the details of our long discussions: we were all so used to the learned inanities that fly about in the discussions at the Government of India meetings that one had to make a supreme effort to understand robust commonsense. But I assure you it was worth it, every minute of the time we spent with them.

MY MAIN OBJECT, I said, was to bring about a revolution in Indian life. For this I need a revolution in Indian education. And yet all the traditional preparations made to usher in the revolution were so mild, so slow, so evolutionary that they even surpassed the elaborate precautions taken by Bottom the Weaver, while introducing the lion on the stage, to ensure that the ladies were not frightened. The existing programmes were such that they could never have roused anyone to anything and it would have been nothing short of a miracle if revolutions could have been made to creep imperceptibly in like the Five Year Plans in education! My advisers told me that they were not educated, but they certainly knew one thing: an attempt to create a revolution must begin with a bang like the blast of a bomb or a splash created by the dropping of a big stone in a pool of stagnant water and that it must shake everyone up, squarely and fully. This was so obvious a thing that we had never noticed it! One does not easily realize that the sophisticated art of education consists mainly in blinding people to the obvious, without necessarily enabling them to see the subtle.

Anyway, we decided to begin a revolution with a revolution – as

simple as that, as our dear friend Nicholas DeWitt would have said. From this point of view, our first decision was that the current school year should begin on the same day all over India – on 14 November. It was a memorable day, the day a revolution in human form was born in this country, a day that is climatically pleasant everywhere, from Kanyakumari to the Himalayas, from the Rann of Kutch to the Bay of Bengal. This itself was a revolution: the people said that something like this had never happened before in the country. I could not be certain and so I asked my Information Secretary to check up. He said that there was a precedent and that one event, the financial year, always began in all parts of India exactly on the same day, the first of April, which is also distinguished by being the day of all fools, and that this was the one uniformity which the Government of India (of the old Imperial British variety and *not* the *deshi* one, mind you) in its wisdom had decided to introduce. Anyway, when wise people decide to act like fools, fools like me will be compelled to act like wise men just to be different. What does it matter in a poor country (that is probably an understatement – I should have rather said, in the poorest country in the world) when the “financial year” begins? We all know too well that the “financial” part of it has never existed and that the “year” part of it is only starvation for 365 days. But an *educational* year in India should begin on the same day throughout the length and breadth of the country! What a tremendous difference it would make for every child to know – and they are not a few, they now form 15 per cent of the population and will soon rise to 24 per cent – that all over India, all children, boys and girls, will begin their studies at the same time and on the same day, a day that is hallowed by the memory of the great one, an inspiring memory that can never die and that now springs up afresh every year, in every flower that blows in the wind, in every grain that ripens in the sun and in every ripple that laughs on the flowing waters of every river! Anyway, we decided to do so and what is probably even more important, actually did it, you know. And by God, shall I take you in confidence? The entire press<sup>4</sup> in the country applauded three features of this decision, features which they said were conspicuous by their

4. You would have guessed by now that the press had every chance to survive in my dictatorship. Who else would publish my speeches, free of charge, otherwise?

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absence in the earlier regime<sup>5</sup>: novelty, quickness, and immediate and firm implementation.

The second decision was equally different and equally revolutionary. All schools and colleges were told that all regular studies should be suspended for six months and that they would have to complete them and pass the examination in the remaining six months of the year only. This was done because we all knew that the curricula were very light, that they did not offer an adequate challenge to the students, and that there would be no educational loss if a period of six months could be carved out from the school year for some other purposes until more appropriate and fuller curricula were prepared and introduced from the next year onwards. On this point, however, our uneducated advisers were not very happy. They were first of all shocked when we told them that the entire year was meant for study and that students were expected to work from 24 hours to 50 hours a week according to their age. They were under the impression that we send our children to schools to play, to make merry, to roam about and generally to develop all those attitudes of intransigence, superficiality, and laziness that mark the scions of the upper classes. They thought that study was meant for examinations, that it should precede them by about two months – if you do not discover, in the meantime, easier methods of passing them, honest or otherwise. But anyway, we educated them on this subject and they understood our view quickly. In fact, the Secretaries were aghast at the speed of their intake – they said that they had never seen a minister understand a point so quickly and so well! Anyway, it was agreed that all the studies in the first year were to be completed in the second six months only; and everyone felt that this was a generous allowance and that if they had known earlier that dictators could be so considerate, they would have – well, let it go.

Our next problem was to find what to do with the six months we had on our hands. Teachers, students, departmental officers, budget provisions for their salaries, everything was there except one; a programme which, unlike the existing brand of education, had some social purpose in it. So we said that everyone should make a gift of

5. By the way, dreams can be funny, you know. I have a distinct recollection that my dictatorship came in before both Nehru and Shastri so that they are not impeached here in the expression “earlier regime”. I know that this is historically impossible. But you know that in dreams as in the Security Council, *anything* can happen.

these six months to national service and actively participate in the creative and joyous task of rebuilding the greater India of our dreams. There was no need for any but some marginal expenditure connected with the programmes; all that we proposed was that the teachers and students should carry on the work of their schools in the normal way and, instead of the usual studies in text-books, develop appropriate programmes of social service in their own areas. Some general guidance was to be given; but they were told that it was for *them* to find out what they could and should do and to do it. National service is like service to God : He never asks for anything. It is for man to find out what he can best offer and offer it.

It was decided that we should address a letter on the subject to all schools. Writing to the State Education Departments was obviously no good because, for quite some time, they had developed a habit of reading only financial sanctions that came from the Centre and nothing else. And so we drew up a programme for all educational institutions. I must say that our illiterate advisers were most helpful here. They did not know any theory, nor could they put it in inch-long words but they knew what was what. According to them, a child became a man or woman (and what else can be the object of education) by living in society and participating in all its joys and travails in a normal manner. They could never realize what we gained by withdrawing children from the community and by letting them grow in the artificial hothouses called "schools". That, they said, was one reason why they wisely did not send their children to school – a reason which the educated people were too ignorant to follow. But when we told them that the teachers and children shall jump the classroom walls and that the schools shall be communities in themselves and shall also be brought together in closer contact with their local communities, they were all too jubilant and approving. In fact, they came out with innumerable ideas about how this could be done, and very soon we were able to compile a document addressed to the students and teachers, explaining broadly what they should do during the next six months for offering their services to the nation.

I SAID "A DOCUMENT", but that was not quite correct. It was really a series of documents, one for each category of institutions, because we soon found that the programme had to differ from one type of institution to another according to the age, maturity, and specialization of the students. But certain items were common to all.

For instance, the entire institution was to meet together at the beginning of the schoolday and offer a prayer. This was to be followed by a suitable programme of talks, discussions, or supervised reading about national reconstruction arranged to suit the level of the students.<sup>6</sup> Then a certain part of *shramdan* was obligatory. All cleaning and upkeep of the school building and its campus was to be done by the students and teachers (unless it was proved to be impossible), and all funds provided for it in the budget were to be diverted to the students' welfare fund. The development of the campus, the cleaning and development of village sites or urban slums was also to be taken up, the general understanding being that every student and teacher should offer *shramdan* for at least three hours a day. A new idea of "homework" was adopted. At present, homework really means school work meant to be done at home by students, parents and private tutors. Our illiterate advisers pointed out that this was a modern educational perversion of a good old custom of children working at home to assist their parents. So we said that "homework" would, in the future, mean the work which children did at home to assist their parents and particularly the mother, and adopted a rule that every child should do "homework" for two hours a day. In order that it might not get ignored, we insisted on a record being maintained in prescribed forms and this record was made an integral part of the requirements for passing.

The steps taken to meet the national food crisis were regarded as national service and were obligatory for all. It was explained, for instance, that the overall food deficit of 7 or 8 per cent that we had at present could be made up, almost fully, if *everyone* gave up one meal a week at least and those who could give up two. It was directed that all teachers and students should fast for one night a week at least and that this should be regarded as an integral part of the school work.

A mass campaign for literacy was to be organized and all teachers and students above middle school had to make adults literate in this period of six months by going to their homes to teach them. Students were also expected to read out daily newspapers and explain the news

6. A knowledge of our cultural heritage, lives and writings of great Indians, history of the freedom struggle, national goals as defined by the Constitution, a vision of the new social order that we are striving for and the means for its creation, the Five Year Plans, etc.

to illiterate people.<sup>7</sup> Teachers and professors were to meet groups of adults and discuss with them the national problems facing us and the way to solve them. In fact, we soon realized that if we could make each university teacher to meet the illiterate or semi-educated citizens and require him to continue their adult education for a period of six months, the worst resistance to a solution of the problem of the medium of instruction at the university stage would have been overcome and the problem would be solved without any difficulty soon afterwards. Anyway, we insisted that the university should go to the masses and meet them and accept adult education as one of its main functions.

Ostentation was to be banned: everyone had to wear a simple dress. Expenditure on hostels was to be cut down to the minimum, partly by introducing simpler and more hygienic food and partly by reducing overhead charges through student participation. Regular studies were not totally taboo. In fact, studies were to be encouraged, subject to two conditions : (1) they should not cut down the time for national service, for four to six hours a day; and (2) they should be integrally related to the national service programme undertaken. Moreover, senior and advanced students were required to help the weaker and backward students regularly and this was to be regarded as their national service, if they so desired. In fact, our view was that studies so organized would be more realistic and more interesting and so help in raising standards. This forecast was found to be fully justified in later evaluations : physical fasting improved health and the mental fasting caused by stoppage of the regular inert studies kindled interest in life and roused curiosity. In short, the whole philosophy and methodology of the movement could be summed up in the following *Testament* which all children were to read and pledge themselves to everyday.

Beloved Bapuji and Chachaji,

You helped us to discover our country to ourselves, to visualize the great destiny towards which it is marching and to commit ourselves to it, and thus gave us faith and confidence in ourselves and in our country's future.

We are the fortunate few of our generation who are privileged to receive education. We realize that in order to provide this privilege to us millions of

7. In addition to this obligatory part, some students should do further work connected with their speciality. For instance, medical students could treat sick people, agriculture students could help farmers, etc.

our poor countrymen are toiling hard and denying themselves even the necessities of existence. We, therefore, pledge ourselves to return this favour by identifying ourselves with the lot of the common people and shall ever strive our best to serve them.

We realize that in the modern world the best insurance for each individual is a social order based on equality and justice and that salvation can never be achieved through selfishness. We shall ever strive to subordinate our desires to the common good.

We realize that India is poor and underdeveloped today. At this moment, the only way to progress lies through toil (much of which is drudgery) and austerity. We shall accept these willingly in order that a tomorrow of less strenuous or more pleasant work and greater comforts may soon be born.

We realize that we are a privileged generation. No earlier generation had this challenge and opportunity of building up a prosperous India. No succeeding generation can have it either, because we hope to complete the task ourselves. No price can be too high to be paid for this privilege.

And thus the revolutionary school year began on the 14 November; and the programme went on so magnificently and such keen enthusiasm was generated that the results surpassed all expectations. And, my God, what a hectic six months I had: touring, talking, seeing, participating, guiding and, above all, learning and getting some new insights into the problem which, for instance, all the learned and bulky documents of the Ministry of Education and of the Planning Commission had totally missed and which I did not find even in the speeches and writings of \_\_\_\_\_<sup>8</sup> who is the Holy Trinity in Indian education (and probably in many other things too), I mean, the trinity of : (1) I-know-all; (2) I-am-always-right; and (3) you-are-an-ignoramus-who-goes-wrong-when-you-do-not-agree-with-me. For instance, I had never realized before that money can do so little really to vitalize education and that what was really needed were two things; (1) a sense of commitment, a commitment beyond self, a commitment to great and abiding values which give a meaning to life; and (2) the creative joy of participating in a worthwhile task. I had never realized so vividly at any earlier time that the apathy, the listlessness, the so-called indiscipline of students and all the endless malaise of our educational system really arose from one cause: what happened in the classroom was an inert action that had long ceased to

8. You can substitute your pet aversion here. It should not be difficult to make a choice: this has been a large and an increasing tribe for some time. It arose among the politicians and is now spreading to the next kinship group, university professors who are not professors.

have any meaning either for the students or for the teachers and that, even though both were trying to keep up a show that they were engaged in a worthwhile or momentous task, the illusion could no longer be maintained for the bulk of students and teachers. This, in fact, was the main point of our illiterate advisers. They said that men would always appreciate a good thing when they saw it. If education was not being valued by society, the educator, they said, must look within and see whether what he was trying to sell as gold was really gold. But instead of doing so, he merely got into a temper (a sure sign of weakness) and called others ignorant, which, to say the least, was very uneducated behaviour. We all agreed with them that the best way to “sell” education was to make it “saleable” and what better way can there be to sell it except to link it intimately with the entire programme of national reconstruction so that the future of education becomes the future of the country itself?

Of course, I spoke first of what I learnt – all dictators always begin (and most of them must also end) with themselves. But all other departments, government itself, learned such a lot. In the beginning, the other departments of government were asked to assist the programme. In doing so, they could not but get themselves infected with the new enthusiasm so that there was a general dynamism in all government departments. What the Army and the Jawan had begun, the schools and the students continued and deepened.

We also discovered that the “day” or “week” celebrations<sup>9</sup> we used to indulge in (e.g., the Harijan Day, the Social Education Day; the Saffai Day, etc., or the Courtesy Week, the Basic Education Week, etc.) were really the worst administrative invention of the post-Independence period. This discovery of the celebration of days or weeks was a feat of genius in the difficult situation which we inherited on the attainment of independence. On the one hand, we had inherited a large number of noble ideas from our national leaders which we could not repudiate. On the other hand, we were not prepared, in a mad rush to cash on past sacrifices, to suffer or work hard for realizing them. It was in this dilemma that the idea of celebrating a day or a week came as a gift from....<sup>10</sup> It killed not two but three birds with one stone. We could reconcile ourselves with our conscience which wanted

9. The classification of programmes into “days” or “weeks” is purely arbitrary and makes no difference of substance because the celebration of a week means, in practice, the celebration of the opening day.

10. You may put in “Heaven” or “Hell”, according to your taste.

noble things to be done. We were not required to compromise with either our selfishness or our laziness because we were not required to do anything whatsoever; and, what is most important of all, we could have some fun we so dearly loved. Like all people who have nothing to celebrate, we just love celebrations. So we converted into a “day” or a “week” celebration every noble concept we could not repudiate in theory and did not desire to put into practice. But now the whole programme was different. In this national service programme, all celebrations within the schools were immediately stopped. How can you celebrate a six-month programme for schools except by work? What is even more important, all celebrations outside the schools were also stopped: how can you celebrate anything at all if you cannot conscript students and teachers for processions and meetings? So the era of celebrations came to an end and inevitably gave place to an era of work.

It was the happiest moment in my life when, after reviewing the outstanding results of the six months of a new campaign, I stood up to address a huge gathering of teachers, students, and parents at the Guru-Shishya Leela Grounds in Newer Delhi. My voice was choked with emotion and I just could not say a word, believe me, a man who can hardly ever stop from talking! Fortunately the situation was saved for me because even as I got up, the crowd began a thunderous clapping which went on and on, getting louder and louder. I thus got a breathing space in which I could control my emotions, become normal, and ready to speak. But the clapping would not stop and went on becoming louder still. It almost reached an irritating point when I was bursting to speak, with the pressure of words and ideas mounting up every millionth of a second in my brain. Yet the crowd went on clapping and did not allow me to say a word. The blood of a Dictator boiled up in me and I wanted to shout them down and felt almost choked. But still the clapping went on and on, becoming ever louder and louder. The next thing I knew was that I was feeling suffocated in bed and the alarm clock which I had set up at 5-30 a.m. was ringing my head off and preventing me from sleeping on. I cursed the nuisance and the man who invented the alarm clock; but there it was – my dictatorship had been destroyed for ever.

And how I regret that it was just a dream!

*(Originally published by the New Era in Indian Education, a public (un)limited concern, the principal subsidiary of People's Welfare Ltd., India)*